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A NOTE

ON

CHARLOTTE BRONTË

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A NOTE

ON

CHARLOTTE BRONTË

23042

BY

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

London
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1877

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TO

My Friend

THEODORE WATTS

I dedicate this study; an inadequate acknowledgment of much personal obligation, and an imperfect expression of fellow-feeling on the subject here imperfectly and inadequately handled.

A. C. S.

A NOTE

ON

CHARLOTTE BRONTË.

THE priceless contribution to our knowledge of one of the greatest among women, for which the thanks of all students who have at heart the honour of English literature are due to Mr. Wemyss Reid, had on its first appearance the singular good fortune to evoke from a weekly paper of much literary and philosophic pretension one of the most profound and memorable remarks ever

put forth even in the columns of the contemporary *Spectator*. On the 11th of November, 1876, there appeared in that quarter a written assurance that its literary critic did actually 'agree with this biographer' in thinking that the works of Charlotte Brontë 'will one day again be regarded as evidences of exceptional intellectual power.' The present writer for once feels himself emboldened to express in his turn his own agreement with this critic in the opinion that they not impossibly may; he will even venture to avow his humble conviction that they may with no great show of unreason be expected to outlive the works of some few at least among the female immortals of whom the happy present hour is so more than seasonably prolific; to be read with delight and

wonder, and re-read with reverence and admiration, when darkness everlasting has long since fallen upon all human memory of their cheap scientific, their vulgar erotic, and their voluminous domestic schools; when even 'Daniel Deronda' has gone the way of all waxwork, when even Miss Broughton no longer cometh up as a flower, and even Mrs. Oliphant is at length cut down like the grass. It is under the rash and reckless impulse of this unfashionable belief that I would offer a superfluous word or two of remark on the twin-born genius of the less mortal sisters who left with us for ever the legacies of 'Jane Eyre' and 'Wuthering Heights.'

The one sovereign quality common alike to the spirit and the work of these two great

women, whose names make up with Mrs. Browning's the perfect trinity for England of highest female fame, is one which even the prodigal Genius or God who presided at her birth could not or would not accord to the passionate and lyric-minded poetess. It is possibly the very rarest of all powers or faculties of imagination applied to actual life and individual character; I can trace it in no living English authoress one half so strongly or so clearly marked as in the work of the illustrious and honoured lady —honoured scarcely more by admiration from some quarters than by obloquy from others—to whom we owe the over-true story of 'Joshua Davidson;' and the worthiest tribute ever yet paid to the memory of Walter Savage Landor. But in

Charlotte and Emily Brontë this innate personal quality was manifested, as far as my knowledge or power of comparison extends, at a quite incomparable degree of excellence; of perfection, I would have written, but for the fear of giving too Irish a turn to the parting phrase of my sentence. It is a quality as hard to define as impossible to mistake; even the static and dynamic terms of definition so freely and scientifically misused in the latest school of feminine romance would scarcely help us much towards an adequate apprehension or expression of it. But its absence or its presence is or should be anywhere and always recognisable at a glance, whether dynamic or merely static, of a skilful or unskilful eye to discern the systole from the diastole of human com-

panionship—or even of inhuman jargon. The crudest as the most refined pedantry of semi-science, tricked out at second hand in the freshest or the stalest phrases of archaic schoolmen or neologic lecturers that may be swept up from the dustiest boards or picked up under the daintiest platforms irradiated or obfuscated by new lamps or old, will avail nothing to guide any possible seeker on the path towards an exploration by physical analysis or metaphysical synthesis of the source or the process, the fountain or the channel or the issue, of this subtle and infallible force of nature—the progress from the root into the fruit of this direct creative instinct. Yet thus far, perhaps, we may reasonably attempt some indication of the difference which divides pure

genius from mere intellect as by a great gulf fixed; the quality of the latter, we may say, is constructive, the property of the former is creative. Adam Bede, for instance, or even Tito Melema, is an example of construction—and the latter is one of the finest in literature; Edward Rochester and Paul Emanuel are creations. And the inevitable test or touchstone of this indefinable difference is the immediate and enduring impression set at once and engraved for ever on the simplest or the subtlest mind of the most careless or the most careful student. In every work of pure genius we feel while it is yet before us—and if we cease for a little to feel when out of sight of it for awhile, we surely feel afresh each time our sight of it is renewed—the sense

of something inevitable, some quality incorporate and innate, which determines that it shall be thus and not otherwise; and we need not the 'illative sense' of Dr. Newman's invention to teach us 'the grammar of assent' to the matter proposed to us as subject or as object for our imaginative belief. Belief, and not assent, it is that we give to the highest.

There is no surer test as there can be no higher evidence than this of that imperative and primary genius which holds its power in fee of no other mind, which derives of no foreign stream through the conduit of no alien channel. Perhaps we may reasonably divide all imaginative work into three classes; the lowest, which leaves us in a complacent

mood of acquiescence with the graceful or natural inventions and fancies of an honest and ingenious workman, and in no mind to question or dispute the accuracy of his transcript from life or the fidelity of his design to the modesty and the likelihood of nature; the second, of high enough quality to engage our judgment in its service, and make direct demand on our grave attention for deliberate assent or dissent; the third, which in the exercise of its highest faculties at their best neither solicits nor seduces nor provokes us to acquiescence or demur, but compels us without question to positive acceptance and belief. Of the first class it would be superfluous to cite instances from among writers of our own day, not undeserving of serious respect and of genuine gratitude for much

honest work done and honest pleasure conferred on us. Of the second order our literature has no more apt and brilliant examples than George Eliot and George Meredith. Of the third, if in such a matter as this I may trust my own instinct—that last resource and ultimate reason of all critics in every case and on every question — there is no clearer and more positive instance in the whole world of letters than that supplied by the genius of Charlotte Brontë.

I do not mean that such an instance is to be found in the treatment of each figure in each of her great three books. If this could accurately be said, it could not reasonably be denied that she might justly claim and must naturally assume that seat by the

side of Shakespeare which certain critics of the hour are prompt alike to assign alternately to the author of 'Adam Bede' and to the author of 'Queen Mary.' Only in the eyes of such critics as these, or in the glassy substitutes which serve their singular kind as proxies for a human squint, will it seem to imply a want of serious interest and respect in the former direction, of loyal and grateful admiration in the latter, if I confess that to my unaided organs and limited capacities of sight the one comparison appears as portentously farcical as the other in its superhuman or subsimious absurdity; that I should find it as hard an article of religion to digest and assimilate into the body of a living faith, which bade me believe in the assumption of the goddess as

that which bade me believe in the ascension of the god to complete the co-eternal and co-equal personality of English genius at its highest apogee, in its triune and bisexual apotheosis. But, without putting in a claim for the author of 'Jane Eyre' as qualified to ascend the height on which a minority of not overwise admirers would fain enthrone a demigoddess of more dubious divinity than hers, I must take leave to reiterate my conviction that no living English or female writer can rationally be held her equal in what I cannot but regard as the highest and the rarest quality which supplies the hardest and the surest proof of a great and absolute genius for the painting and the handling of human characters in mutual relation and reaction. Even the glorious mistress of all

forms and powers of imaginative prose, who has lately left France afresh in mourning—even George Sand herself had not this gift in like measure with those great twin sisters in genius who were born to the stern and strong-hearted old Rector of Haworth.

The gift of which I would speak is that of a power to make us feel in every nerve, at every step forward which our imagination is compelled to take under the guidance of another's, that thus and not otherwise, but in all things altogether even as we are told and shown, it was and it must have been with the human figures set before us in their action and their suffering; that thus and not otherwise they absolutely must and would have felt and thought and

spoken under the proposed conditions. It is something for a writer to have achieved if he has made it worth our fancy's while to consider by the light of imaginative reason whether the creatures of his own fancy would in actual fact and life have done as he has made them do or not; it is something, and by comparison it is much. But no definite terms of comparison will suffice to express how much more than this it is to have done what the youngest of capable readers must feel on first opening 'Jane Eyre' that the writer of its very first pages has shown herself competent to do. In almost all other great works of its kind, in almost all the sovereign masterpieces even of Fielding, of Thackeray, of the royal and imperial master, Sir Walter

Scott himself—to whose glorious memory I need offer no apology for the attribution of epithets which I cannot but regret to remember that even in their vulgar sense he would not have regarded as other than terms of honour—even in the best and greatest works of these our best and greatest we do not find this one great good quality so innate, so immanent as in hers. At most we find the combination of event with character, the coincidence of action with disposition, the coherence of consequences with emotions, to be rationally credible and acceptable to the natural sense of a reasonable faith. We rarely or never feel that, given the characters, the incidents become inevitable; that such passion must needs bring forth none other than such

action, such emotions cannot choose but find their only issue in such events. And certainly we do not feel, what it seems to me the highest triumph of inspired intelligence and creative instinct to succeed in making us feel, that the mainspring of all, the central relation of the whole, 'the very pulse of the machine,' has in it this occult inexplicable force of nature. But when Catherine Earnshaw says to Nelly Dean, 'I *am* Heathcliff!' and when Jane Eyre answers Edward Rochester's question, whether she feels in him the absolute sense of fitness and correspondence to herself which he feels to himself in her, with the words which close and crown the history of their twin-born spirits—'To the finest fibre of my nature, sir'—we feel to the finest fibre

of our own that these are no mere words. On this ground at least it might for once be not unpardonable to borrow their standing reference or illustration from that comparative school of critics whose habit of comparison we have treated with something less than respect, and say, as was said on another score of Emily Brontë in particular by Sydney Dobell, in an admirable paper which we miss with regret and with surprise from among the costly relics of his genius, so lovingly set in order and so ably lighted up by the faithful friendship and the loyal intelligence of Professor Nichol —that either sister in this single point 'has done no less' than Shakespeare. As easily might we imagine a change of the mutual relations between the characters of Shake-

speare as a corresponding revolution or reversal of conditions among theirs.

If I turn again for contrast or comparison with their works to the work of George Eliot, it will be attributed by no one above the spiritual rank and type of Pope's representative dunces to irreverence or ingratitude for the large and liberal beneficence of her genius at its best. But she alone among our living writers is generally admitted or assumed as the rightful occupant, or at least as the legitimate claimant, of that foremost place in the front rank of artists in this kind which none can hold or claim without challenging such comparison or such contrast. And in some points it is undeniable that she may

claim precedence, not of these alone, but of all other illustrious women. Such wealth and depth of thoughtful and fruitful humour, of vital and various intelligence, no woman has ever shown—no woman perhaps has ever shown a tithe of it. In knowledge, in culture, perhaps in capacity for knowledge and for culture, Charlotte Brontë was no more comparable to George Eliot than George Eliot is comparable to Charlotte Brontë in purity of passion, in depth and ardour of feeling, in spiritual force and fervour of forthright inspiration. It would be rather a rough and sweeping than a loose or inaccurate division which should define the one as a type of genius distinguished from intellect, the other of intellect as opposed to genius. But it would, as I

venture to think, be little or nothing more or less than accurate to recognise in George Eliot a type of intelligence vivified and coloured by a vein of genius, in Charlotte Brontë a type of genius directed and moulded by the touch of intelligence. No better test of this distinction could be desired than a comparison of their respective shortcomings or failures. These will serve, by their difference in kind and import; in quality and in weight, to show the depth and width of the great gulf between pure genius and pure intellect, even better than a comparison of their highest merits and achievements.

That great genius is liable to great error the world has ever been willing, if not more

than willing, to admit; that great genius not equally balanced by great intellect is not one half as liable to go one half as wrong as intellect unequally counterpoised by genius, is a truth less popular and less familiar, but neither less important nor less indisputable. That Charlotte Brontë, a woman of the first order of genius, could go very wrong indeed, there are whole scenes and entire characters in her work which afford more than ample proof. But George Eliot, a woman of the first order of intellect, has once and again shown how much further and more steadily and more hopelessly and more irretrievably and more intolerably wrong it is possible for mere intellect to go than it ever can be possible for mere genius. Having no taste for the dissection of dolls, I shall leave Daniel Deronda

in his natural place above the ragshop door; and having no ear for the melodies of a Jew's harp, I shall leave the Spanish Gipsy to perform on that instrument to such audience as she may collect. It would be unjust and impertinent to dwell much on Charlotte Brontë's brief and modest attempts in verse; but it would be unmanly and unkindly to touch at all on George Eliot's; except indeed to remark in passing that they are about equally commendable for the one and for the other of those negative good qualities which I have commended in Miss Brontë's. And from this point of difference, if from no other point here discernible, those who will or who can learn anything may learn a lesson in criticism which may perhaps be worth laying to heart: that genius, though it can

put forth no better claim than intellect may assert for itself to share the papal gift of infallibility, is naturally the swifter of the two to perceive and to retrieve its errors. Where genius takes one false step in the twilight and draws back by instinct, intelligence once misguided will take a thousand without the slightest diffidence; will put its best foot foremost in the pitchy darkness, step out gallantly through all brakes and quagmires till stuck fast up to the middle, and higher yet, in some blind Serbonian bog of blundering presumption, and thence will not improbably strike up a psalm of hoarse thanksgiving or shrill self-gratulation, to be echoed from afar by the thousand marshy throats of a Mæotian or Bœotian frog concert, for the grace here given it to have set a triumphant foot on the

solid rock, and planted a steady flagstaff on the splendid summits of supreme and unsurpassable success.

But we will follow neither the brief excursions of tentative and self-distrustful genius, nor the long aberrations of belated and self-confident intelligence, across any line of country never made for them to traverse and return with any trophies of the chase. Britomartis or Bradamante, on her most desperate and forlorn adventure, has a claim at least on the compassionate forbearance of every good knight-errant who may have ridden on the like or any such other quest; and even the felon Sir Breuse Sans Pitié might be moved by some momentary throb of chivalrous condolence at

the pitiful and unseemly spectacle of an Amazon thrown sprawling over the crupper of her spavined and spur-galled Pegasus. It is on ground proper to either or common to both that we will compare the pace and action, the blood and the wind and the staying power, of either steed entered for this race. And first we will examine, dropping our equine metaphor before we have ridden it to death, what may be the very gravest flaws or shortcomings perceptible in the work of Charlotte Brontë. So doing, I believe that any loyal and capable critic will as surely find as he will joyfully admit that her failures never affect the central and radical quality of that work. The heart of it is always whole; its outskirts or extremities alone, perhaps only its dress and decorations, are

in any degree impaired. Take the first work of her genius in its ripe fullness and freshness of new fruit; a twig or two is twisted or blighted of the noble tree, a bud or so has been nipped or cankered by adverse winds or frost; but root and branch and bole are all straight and strong and solid and sound in grain. Whatever in 'Jane Eyre' is other than good is also less than important. The accident which brings a famished wanderer to the door of unknown kinsfolk might be a damning flaw in a novel of mere incident; but incident is not the keystone and commonplace is not the touchstone of this. The vulgar insolence and brutish malignity of the well-born guests at Thornfield Hall are grotesque and incredible in speakers of their imputed station; these

are the natural properties of that class of persons which then supplied, as it yet supplies, the writers of such articles as one of memorable infamy and imbecility on 'Jane Eyre' to the artistic and literary department of the 'Quarterly Review.' So gross and grievous a blunder would entail no less than ruin on a mere novel of manners; but accuracy in the distinction and reproduction of social characteristics is not the test of capacity for such work as this. That test is only to be found in the grasp and manipulation of manly and womanly character. And, to my mind, the figure of Edward Rochester in this book remains, and seems like to remain, one of the only two male figures of wholly truthful workmanship and vitally heroic mould ever carved and coloured

by a woman's hand. The other it is superfluous to mention; all possible readers will have uttered before I can transcribe the name of Paul Emanuel.

And now we must regretfully and respectfully consider of what quality and what kind may be the faults which deform the best and ripest work of Charlotte Brontë's chosen rival. Few or none, I should suppose, of her most passionate and intelligent admirers would refuse to accept 'The Mill on the Floss' as on the whole at once the highest and the purest and the fullest example of her magnificent and matchless powers—for matchless altogether, as I have already insisted, they undoubtedly are in their own wide and fruitful field of work. The first two-thirds of the

book suffice to compose perhaps the very noblest of tragic as well as of humorous prose idyls in the language; comprising, as they likewise do, one of the sweetest as well as saddest and tenderest as well as subtlest examples of dramatic analysis—a study in that kind as soft and true as Rousseau's, as keen and true as Browning's, as full as either's of the fine and bitter sweetness of a pungent and fiery fidelity. But who can forget the horror of inward collapse, the sickness of spiritual reaction, the reluctant incredulous rage of disenchantment and disgust, with which he first came upon the thrice unhappy third part? The two first volumes have all the intensity and all the perfection of George Sand's best work, tempered by all the simple purity and interfused with all the stainless pathos of Mrs.

Gaskell's; they carry such affluent weight of thought and shine with such warm radiance of humour as invigorates and illuminates the work of no other famous woman; they have the fiery clarity of crystal or of lightning; they go near to prove a higher claim and attest a clearer right on the part of their author than that of George Sand herself to the crowning crown of praise conferred on her by the hand of a woman even greater and more glorious than either in her sovereign gift of lyric genius, to the salutation given as by an angel indeed from heaven, of 'large-brained woman and large-hearted man.' And the fuller and deeper tone of colour combined with greater sharpness and precision of outline may be allowed to excuse the apparent amount of obliga-

tion—though we may hardly see how this can be admitted to explain the remarkable reticence which reserves all acknowledgment and dissembles all consciousness of that sufficiently palpable and weighty and direct obligation—to Mrs. Gaskell's beautiful story of 'The Moorland Cottage'; in which not the identity of name alone, nor only their common singleness of heart and simplicity of spirit, must naturally recall the gentler memory of the less high-thoughted and high-reaching heroine to the warmest and the worthiest admirers of the later-born and loftier-minded Maggie; though the hardness and brutality of the baser brother through whom she suffers be the outcome in manhood as in childhood of mere greedy instinct and vulgar egotism, while the full

eventual efflorescence of the same gracious qualities in Tom Tulliver is tracked with incomparable skill and unquestionable certitude of touch to the far other root of sharp narrow self-devotion and honest harsh self-reliance.

'So far, all honour;' as Phraxanor says of Joseph in the noble poem of Mr. Wells. But what shall any one say of the upshot? If we are really to take it on trust, to confront it as a contingent or conceivable possibility, resting our reluctant faith on the authority of so great a female writer, that a woman of Maggie Tulliver's kind can be moved to any sense but that of bitter disgust and sickening disdain by a thing—I will not write, a man—of Stephen

Guest's; if we are to accept as truth and fact, however astonishing and revolting, so shameful an avowal, so vile a revelation as this; in that ugly and lamentable case, our only remark, as our only comfort, must be that now at least the last word of realism has surely been spoken, the last abyss of cynicism has surely been sounded and laid bare. The three master cynics of French romance are eclipsed and distanced and extinguished, passed over and run down and snuffed out on their own boards. To the rosy innocence of Laclos, to the cordial optimism of Stendhal, to the trustful tenderness of Mérimée, no such degradation of female character seems ever to have suggested itself as imaginable. Iago never flung such an imputation on

all womanhood; Madame de Merteuil would never have believed it. For a higher view and a more cheering aspect of the sex, we must turn back to these gentler teachers, these more flattering painters of our own; we must take up 'La Double Méprise'—or 'Le Rouge et le Noir'—or 'Les Liaisons Dangereuses.'

But I for one am not prepared or willing to embrace a belief so much too degrading and depressing for the conception of those pure and childlike souls. My faith will not digest at once the first two volumes and the third volume of 'The Mill on the Floss'; my conscience or credulity has not gorge enough for such a gulp. Whatever capacity for belief is in me I

find here impaled once more as on the horns of that old divine's dilemma between the irreconcilable attributes of goodness and omnipotence in the supposed Creator of suffering and of sin. If the one quality be predicable, the other quality cannot be predicable of the same subject. As between κοινὴ and ποινὴ, we must choose Lady Percy on the lap of Falstaff, bidding him patch up his old body for heaven; Miranda nestling in the arms of Trinculo; Virgilia seeking consolation for her husband's exile in the rival devotion of Brutus and Sicinius; Desdemona finding refuge from her troubles on the bosom of Roderigo—could no longer pretend to be the widow of Hotspur, the bride of Ferdinand, the wife of the noblest Roman, the fellow-martyr of the

nobler Moor. No higher tribute can be claimed and no deeper condemnation can be incurred by perverse or intermittent genius than is conveyed or implied in such comparisons as these. The hideous transformation by which Maggie is debased—were it but for an hour—into the willing or yielding companion of Stephen's flight would probably and deservedly have been resented as a brutal and vulgar outrage on the part of a male novelist. But the man never lived, I do believe, who could have done such a thing as this: as the man, I should suppose, does not exist who could make for the first time the acquaintance of Mr. Stephen Guest with no incipient sense of a twitching in his fingers and a tingling in his toes at the notion of any con-

tact between Maggie Tulliver and a cur so far beneath the chance of promotion to the notice of his horsewhip, or elevation to the level of his boot.

Here then is the patent flaw, here too plainly is the flagrant blemish, which defaces and degrades the very crown and flower of George Eliot's wonderful and most noble work; no rent or splash on the raiment, no speck or scar on the skin of it, but a cancer in the very bosom, a gangrene in the very flesh. It is a radical and mortal plague-spot, corrosive and incurable; in the apt and accurate phrase of Rabelais, 'an enormous solution of continuity.' The book is not the same before it and after. No washing or trimming, no pruning or purging, could eradicate or efface it; it could only be removable

by amputation and remediable by cautery. It is even a worse offence against ethics, a more grievous insult to the moral sentiment or sense, because more deliberate and elaborate, than the two actual and unpardonable sins of Shakespeare: the menace of unnatural marriage between Oliver and Celia, and again between Isabella and her 'old fantastical duke of dark corners.' Scandalous and injurious as these vile suggestions are, they are yet but as hasty blots dropped by an impatient hand, as crude excrescences which may be pared and leave no scar, as broken hints of a bad dream which the waking memory may be fain and able to forget, to shake off it and be clean again; retaining no thought of Rosalind's cousin but as she first came into

the forest of Arden, of Claudio's sister but as she first was enrolled among the votarists of St. Clare.

Far otherwise it is with the poor noble heroine so strangely disgraced and discrowned of natural honour by the strong and cruel hand which created her; and which could not redeem or raise her again, even by the fittest and noblest of all deaths conceivable, from the mire of ignominy into which it had been pleased to cast her down or bid her slip at the beck and call of a counter-jumping Antinous, a Lauzun of the counting-house, as vulgar as Vivien and as mean as the fellow who could gloat on the prospective degradation and anticipated unhappiness of a woman he forsooth had loved,

under the wholly impossible condition of an utterly unimaginable hypothesis that the unfortunate young lady, who had at least the good fortune to escape the miserable ignominy of union with such a kinsman, might have declined on a range of lower feelings and a narrower heart than his; a supposition, as most men would think, beyond the power of omnipotence itself to realise. Surely our world would seem in danger of forgetting, under the guidance and example of its most brilliant literary chiefs, that there are characters and emotions which may not lie beyond the limits of degraded nature, but do assuredly grovel beneath the notice of undegenerate art; and that of such, most unquestionably,—if any such there be—are the characters and emo-

tions of such reptile amorists as debase by the indecent exposure of their dastardly and rancorous egotism the moral value of such otherwise admirable masterpieces as 'Locksley Hall' and 'The Mill on the Floss.' An eminent historian, notable alike as a reviler of Frenchmen and a champion of Bulgarians, has written a paper to show that the law of honour as understood by our forefathers is an obsolete and artificial invention of depraved or barbarous times; an opinion which may help to explain, if not to justify, his national antipathies and sympathies; and some at least among our living elders in the field of imaginative letters would seem to have adopted, with more than historic ardour, a creed which nullifies the foolish traditions and explodes the simple doctrines

of superstitious chivalry. Yet I for one, though not like to feel personally aggrieved or even ungratified by the most extravagant of English compliments addressed to France, should be sorry to suppose that it was even yet a taste exclusively reserved for men with French blood in their veins or French sympathies in their hearts, to prefer the old-world principle of mere chivalrous loyalty, of passion self-sacrificed and self-forgetting woman-worship, of knightly folly and faith shown even in the service of a lawless love —or lawless but for the law of honour, that worn-out spiritual mainspring and worthless moral motive of 'art with poisonous honey stolen from France'—to all the home-made treacle of the Laureate's morality. Poisonous as to certain tastes may be the

natural passions condoned or consecrated by chivalry, and preposterous in certain eyes as are the conventional principles established or confirmed by its law, I am not reluctant, on behalf of the nation and its creed, to admit that it would be no less difficult to derive from a French origin or refer to a French example the taint of such a distemper as is implied by this distaste, than to inoculate with its infection the spirit of a Frenchman or a gentleman.

No outrage of this kind on womanly loyalty and manly instinct was among the possible errors of Charlotte Brontë's heroic soul. To errors of some gravity that great spirit was indeed liable on more lines than one; her critical judgment, for instance, on Mr. Tenny-

son's 'In Memoriam' was almost as grotesque in its ineptitude as that of M. Taine's very self; and under the gigantic shadow of Balzac's many-featured and colossal empire she would seem, like many if not most Englishwomen, to have come in as it were on the wrong side. The critical faculty in a woman of genius, if not well trained and cultivated with much labour of spiritual husbandry, seems naturally more prone to such flaws and lapses than the learned judgment of an intelligence duly warmed by the suns and watered by the streams of wide and fertilising study can ever claim the slightest excuse or plead the slightest apology for having shown itself at any time to be. Nor can we say that Miss Brontë's more proper and natural faculty of creative imagination was

exempt from its own special chances of error, its own peculiar liabilities to wrong. But from any such error and from any such collapse as those on which we have remarked in others—from all such disloyalty to clear moral law, from all such debasement or degradation of high personal instinct—from all malevolence, from all brutality, from all selfish and vindictive cowardice—from any taint of vile or vulgar or ignoble sympathies, no human spirit was ever more triumphantly delivered—was ever more gloriously free.

Another not insignificant point of difference, though less notable than this, we find in the broad sharp contrast offered by the singular perfection of George Eliot's

earliest imaginative work, with its gracious union of ease and strength, its fullness and purity of outline, its clearness and accuracy of touch, its wise and tender equity, its radiant and temperate humour, its harmony and sincerity of tone, to the doubtful, heavy-gaited, floundering tread of Charlotte Brontë's immature and tentative genius, at its first start on the road to so triumphal a goal as lay ahead of it. No reader of average capacity could so far have failed to appreciate the delicate and subtle strength of hand put forth in the 'Scenes of Clerical Life' as to feel any wonder mingling with his sense of admiration when the same fine and potent hand had gathered its latter laurels in a wider field of work; but even the wise and cordial judgment which had discerned

the note of power and sincerity perceptible in the crude coarse outlines of 'The Professor' may well have been startled and shaken out of all judicial balance and critical reserve at sight of the sudden sunrise which followed so fast on that diffident uncertain dawn. One of the two only women among their contemporaries, who for absolute inspiration of positive genius may without absurdity of anticlimax be named beside Charlotte Brontë and her sister, has told how sudden and how perfect was the conversion wrought by a first reading of the manuscript of 'Indiana' on the grim and truculent amity of her first literary tutor and censor, the Rhadamanthine author of 'Fragoletta'; who certainly, to judge by his own examples of construction, had some

right to pronounce with authority how a novel ought *not* to be written. But the transfiguration of spirit and power revealed by the marvellous advent of the English masterpiece has in it a more splendid sign of miracle than the fiery daybreak of George Sand's.

There is yet a third point of contrast which could not be passed over without such gross and grievous injustice to the very loveliest quality of George Eliot's work as might deservedly expose me to the disgraceful danger of a niche in the temple of ill-fame by the side of those reserved for the representative successors of Messrs. Gifford and Croker. No man or woman, as far as I can recollect, outside the order of poets, has ever written of children with such adorable

fidelity of affection as the spiritual mother of Totty, of Eppie, and of Lillo. The fiery-hearted Vestal of Haworth had no room reserved in the palace of her passionate and high-minded imagination as a nursery for inmates of such divine and delicious quality. There is a certain charm of attraction as well as compassion wrought upon us by the tragic childhood of Jane Eyre; and no study can exceed for exquisite veracity and pathos the subtle and faultless portrait of the child Paulina in the opening chapters of 'Villette'; but the attraction of these is not wholly or mainly the charm of infancy, as felt either in actual fleshly life or in simple reflection from the flawless mirror of loving and adoring genius; it comes rather from the latent suggestion or refraction of the woman yet to be,

struck sharply back or dimly shaded out from the deep glass held up to us of a passionate and visionary childhood. We begin at once to consider how the children in Charlotte Brontë's books will grow up; it is too evident that they are not there for their own childish sake—a fatal and infallible note of inferiority from the baby-worshipper's point of view. What thickest-headed quarterly section or subdivision of a human dullard ever vexed his pitifully scant quarter of an average allowance of brains with the question how Totty would grow up, and whether or not into a modified likeness of her mother? She is Totty for ever and ever, a doubly immortal little child, set in the lap of our love for the kisses and the laughter of all time, to the last generation of possible human readers. But

of Paulina we cannot choose but take thought with Lucy Snowe how such 'a very unique child' will grow up, and what brighter or darker chances may then bring out in full her terrible incalculable capacity of suffering and of love. And, hard though it may be to determine as with legal precision what strange shape and colour may not be taken by human affections under the pressure of circumstance or the strain of suffering, it is yet so difficult to believe, for instance, in the dread and repulsion felt by a forsaken wife and tortured mother for the very beauty and dainty sweetness of her only new-born child, as recalling the cruel sleek charm of the human tiger who had begotten it, that we are wellnigh moved to think one of the most powerfully and exquisitely written chapters in 'Shirley'

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a chapter which could hardly have been written at all by a woman, or for that matter by a man, of however kindly and noble a nature, in whom the instinct or nerve or organ of love for children was even of average natural strength and sensibility. Milton might have conceived such a thing, but certainly not Shakespeare; or Corneille, but assuredly not Hugo. Motherhood to Charlotte Brontë must have been a more vague and dim abstraction than his camel to the mythical sage of Germany or his seaport to the nautical king of Bohemia. In George Eliot it is the most vivid and vital impulse which lends to her large intelligence the utmost it ever has of the spiritual breath and living blood of genius; and never had any such a gift more plainly and immediately as from the very heart of heaven.

Most of her men may have been overpraised by her blatant and loose-tongued outriders or pursuivants in the world of letters; and some also of her women may have been praised at least up to the mark of their deserts; not one of her little children ever can be. They are good enough to play with the little people of the greatest among poets, from Astyanax down to Mamillius, and onwards again even to that poor 'Petit Paul' but now baptized as in the tears—'tears such as angels weep'—of our mighty and most loving Master. None among the many and truly great qualities of their illustrious mother seems to me so precious as this one; so wholly worthy of the more tender tribute paid by men's loving thanks to something other if not lovelier, and sweeter if less rare, than genius.

But saving for her 'plentiful lack' of inborn baby-worship I cannot think of any great good quality most proper to the most noble among women which was not eminent in the genius as in the nature of Charlotte Brontë. Take for example neither of her great two masterpieces, but the most unequal and least fortunate of her three great books. Weakest on that very side where the others are strongest, 'Shirley' is doubtless a notable example of failure in the central and crucial point of masculine character. Robert Moore is rather dubious than damnable as a study from the male; but for his brother the most fervent of special pleaders can hardly find much to say on that score. No quainter example of a woman of genius in breeches—and very badly fashioned and badly fitting

breeches too—was ever exhibited by George Sand's very self, in the days when she refused or accorded the gift of a memorial button off her own to the soft petition of the suppliant Heine. Assuredly 'Louis Moore' would never have passed muster with the very stolidest of all Swiss as the one unmistakable young man in a masquerading party of questionably mingled sexes—as I suppose we are bound to take her word for it that the author of 'Lettres d'un Voyageur' did actually succeed in passing. Glorious words are given him to utter, but they come as from under a mask without eyesight or feature or native organ of speech. Miss Brontë has written nothing finer, nothing of more vivid and exquisite eloquence, than the best passages of his diary; than the sweet and sublime rhapsody on a

windy moonlit vigil, where the words have in them the very breath and magic and riotous radiance, the utter rapture and passion and splendour of the high sonorous night. No other woman that I know of, not George Sand herself, could have written a prose sentence of such exalted and perfect poetry as this :—'The moon reigns glorious, glad of the gale; as glad as if she gave herself to its fierce caress with love.' Nothing can beat that; no one can match it: it is the first and last absolute and sufficient and triumphant word ever to be said on the subject. It paints wind like David Cox, and light like Turner. To find anything like it in verse we must go to the highest springs of all; to Pindar or to Shelley or to Hugo. And these, in the famous phrase of Brummell's valet—these are her failures.

But what shall be said of her successes? Let us again take a single instance in witness of what one woman, and one only in all time, has done for proof of what the greatest of her kind can do in the loftiest way of moral insight and dramatic imagination. Cervantes alone among all men has done the like; for Sterne has not; for Thackeray has not. There is no first sense of weakness or faultiness or moral grotesque on his part, of pity or question or amusement but half compatible with reverence and tender respect on our own, to overcome in the case of Uncle Toby; if from the first we have to smile at him, we never from the first have to wince or start as at something incongruous with the qualities which evoke our general and affectionate regard. And in the case of

Colonel Newcome our sense of his intellectual infirmity and imperfection is never quite overcome or transfigured by our sense of his moral and chivalrous excellence; if indeed it will ever quite allow us to shake or drive off the lurking or recurring impression that in the author's mind the very idea of goodness was inseparably inwoven and inwound with the thought of some qualifying deformity or characteristic debility, of something in the very essence of its composition inferior and infirm; some weakness or malformation of mind, some sprawling or splay-footed imbecility corresponding to the physical disfigurement of Major Dobbin. One reason or explanation not visibly inapt or inadequate to account for this ungracious impression and the inevitable discomfort or

disrelish left by it on the reader's taste may perhaps be found to lie in the curiously undisguised and exuberant admiration with which his creator dilates and expatiates on the charm and perfection of the good Colonel's unquestionable goodness; displaying as it were with insistent ostentation a frankness of sympathy and irrepressible effusion of demonstrative esteem for magnanimity and virtue, which in time of afterthought may or may not make us like all the better and respect all the more the personality and manhood of the workman, but which in either case must needs to some extent impair rather than enhance the actual and present impression of his work.

For the creator of Don Quixote we need make no such allowance; we need make no

such reservation on her behalf whose crowning title to men's honour is that she was the creator of Paul Emanuel. Had she none other than this only, yet this alone would place her among the highest of human rulers in 'the brightest heaven of invention'—

λαμπρούς ξυνάστας ἐμπρέποντας αἰθέρι.

Most children, I suppose, who are at once given to dreaming and capable of devotion, must know the mood of loyal fancy and tender ardour so perfectly expressed in the wish of Mrs. Gaskell's little Maggie that she could have waited as a servant on Don Quixote; and the feeling is akin to this with which at a later age any one of kindred nature, on their first intimate acquaintance, and in a great degree ever after, is certain to regard M. Paul. Supreme as is the spiritual

triumph of Cervantes in the person of his perfect knight over all insult and mockery of brutal chance and ruffianly realities, all cudgels and all cheats and all contumely, it is hardly a more marvellous or a completer example of imaginative and moral mastery than the triumph of Charlotte Brontë in the quaint person of her grim little Professor over his own eccentric infirmities of habit and temper, more hazardous to our sense of respect than any outward risk or infliction of alien violence or mockery from duchesses or muleteers; a triumph so naturally drawn out and delicately displayed in the swift steady gradations of change and development, now ludicrous and now attractive, and wellnigh adorable at last, through which the figure of M. Paul seems to pass as under summer

lights and shadows, till it gradually opens upon us in human fullness of self-unconscious charm and almost sacred beauty—yet always with the sense of some latent infusion, some tender native admixture of a quality at once loveable and laughable; with something indeed of that quaint sweet kind of earnest affection and half-smiling veneration which all men fit to read him feel to their 'heart's root' for the person even more than for the writings of Charles Lamb. That our smile should in no wise impair for one instant our reverence, that our reverence should in no wise make us abashed or ashamed for one moment at the recollection of our smile—this is the final test and triumph of a genius to which we find no likeness outside the very highest rank of creators in the

sphere of spiritual invention or of moral imagination.

All who have ever read it will remember the exquisite saying of Chateaubriand so exquisitely rendered by Mr. Arnold :—'The true tears are those which are called forth by the beauty of poetry; there must be as much admiration in them as sorrow.' The true tears are also those of a yet rarer kind, which are called up at least, if not called forth, by the beauty of goodness; and in such unshed tears as these are the thoughts as it were baptised, which attend upon our memory of some few among the imperishable shadows of men created by man's genius; phantoms more actual and vital than the creators they outlive, as mankind outlives the gods of its

own creation. There is or should be for all men such consecration in a great man's tears as cannot but glorify the source and embalm the subject of their flow. We may even, and not unreasonably, suspect and fear that it must be through some defect or default in ourselves if we cannot feel as they do the force or charm of that which touches others, and these our betters as often as our equals, so nearly; if we cannot, for example,—as I may regretfully confess that I never could—feel adequately or in full the bitter sweetness that so many thousands—and most notably among them all a better man by far and a far worthier judge than I—have tasted in those pages of Dickens which hold the story of Little Nell; a story in which all the elaborate accumulation of pathetic incident and

interest, so tenderly and studiously built up, has never, to speak truth, given me one passing thrill—in the exquisitely fit and faithful phrase of a great living poet, one 'sweet possessive pang'—of the tender delight and pity requickened wellnigh to tears at every fresh reperusal or chance recollection of that one simpler page in 'Bleak House' which describes the baby household tended by the little sister who leaves her lesser charges locked up while she goes out charing; a page which I can imagine that many a man unused to the melting mood would not undertake to read out aloud without a break. But this inability to feel with those who have been most deeply moved by the earlier design of the same great master—sovereign over all

competitors of his country and his day in the conterminous provinces of laughter and of tears—this incompetence or obduracy of temper is anything but a source of self-complacent satisfaction when I remember that foremost among these was the illustrious man of lion-hearted genius who but thirteen years since was still our greatest countryman surviving from an age of godlike giants and gods as yet but half divine; the Roman who best knew Greece, the Englishman who best loved England; the friend of Pericles and of Chatham, the associate of Sophocles and of Shakespeare; the heroic poet who retained at the age of Nestor whatever qualities were noblest in the nature of Achilles—all the lightnings of his mortal wrath, and all the tenderness of his immortal tears.

It is certainly no subject for a boast—perhaps it properly should rather be matter for a blush—that Landor's little favourite among all the deathless children begotten by the genius of Dickens should never have had power to work such transformation on my eyes as many a line of his own in verse or prose has wrought so many a time upon them: for if ever that sovereign power of perfection was made manifest in human words, such words assuredly were his, whether English or Latin, who wrote that epitaph on the martyred patriots of Spain, as far exceeding in its majesty of beauty the famous inscription for the Spartan three hundred as the law of the love of liberty exceeds all human laws of mere obedience; who gave back Iphigenia to Agamemnon for

ever, and Vipsania for an hour to Tiberius. Before the breath of such a spirit as speaks in his transcendent words, the spirit of a loyal-minded man is bowed down as it were at a touch and melted into burning tears, to be again raised up by it and filled and kindled and expanded into something—or he dreams so—of a likeness for the moment to itself.

Some portion of a faculty such as this, some touch of the same godlike and wonder-working might of imperious moral quality, some flush of the same divine and plenary inspiration, there was likewise in the noble genius and heroic instinct of Charlotte Brontë. Some part of the power denied to many a writer of 'more keen and rare intelligence than even hers we feel 'to the finest fibre of our nature' at the slight strong touch

of her magnetic hand. The phrase of 'passionate perfection,' devised by Mr. Tennyson to describe the rarest type of highest human character, is admirably applicable to her special style at its best. The figure of the young missionary St. John Rivers is by no means to be rated as one of her great unsurpassable successes in spiritual portraiture; the central mainspring of his hard fanatic heroism is never quite adequately touched; her own apparent lack of sympathy with this white marble clergyman (counterpart, as it were, of the 'black marble' Brocklehurst, who chills and darkens the dreary dawn of the story) seems here and there as though it scarcely could be held down by force of artistic conscience from passing into actual and avowed aversion; but the im-

perishable passion and perfection of the words describing the moorland scene of which his eyes at parting take their long last look must have drawn the tears to many another man's that his own were not soft enough to shed.

This instinct (if I may so call it) for the tragic use of landscape was wellnigh even more potent and conspicuous in Emily than in Charlotte. Little need was there for the survivor to tell us in such earnest and tender words of memorial record how 'my sister Emily loved the moors': that love exhales, as a fresh wild odour from a bleak shrewd soil, from every storm-swept page of 'Wuthering Heights.' All the heart of the league-long billows of rolling and breathing and brightening heather is blown

with the breath of it on our faces as we read; all the wind and all the sound and all the fragrance and freedom and gloom and glory of the high north moorland—'in winter nothing more dreary, in summer nothing more divine.' Even in Charlotte Brontë's highest work I find no touches of such exquisite strength and triumphant simplicity as here. There is nothing known to me in any book of quite equal or similar effect to that conveyed by one or two of these. Take for instance that marvellous note of landscape struck as it seems unconsciously by the heaven-born instinct of a supreme artist in composition and colour, in tones and shades and minor notes of tragic and magic sweetness, which serves as overture to the last fierce rapturous passage of raging love and

mad recrimination between Heathcliff and the dying Catherine; the mention of the church-bell that in winter could just be heard ringing right across the naked little glen, but in summer the sound was lost, muffled by the murmur of blowing foliage and branches full of birds. The one thing I know or can remember as in some sort comparable in its effect to this passage is of course that notice of the temple-haunting martlet and its loved mansionry which serves as prelude to the entrance of Lady Macbeth from under the buttresses where its pendant bed and procreant cradle bore witness to the delicate air in which incarnate murder also was now to breed and haunt. Even more wonderful perhaps in serene perfection of subdued and sovereign power is the last

brief paragraph of that stormy and fiery tale. There was a dark unconscious instinct as of primitive nature-worship in the passionate great genius of Emily Brontë, which found no corresponding quality in her sister's. It is into the lips of her representative Shirley Keeldar that Charlotte puts the fervent 'pagan' hymn of visionary praise to her mother nature—Hertha, Demeter, 'la déesse des dieux,' which follows on her fearless indignant repudiation of Milton and his Eve. Nor had Charlotte's less old-world and Titanic soul any touch of the self-dependent solitary contempt for all outward objects of faith and hope, for all aspiration after a changed heart or a contrite spirit or a converted mind, which speaks in the plain-song note of Emily's clear stern verse with such

grandeur of antichristian fortitude and self-controlling self-reliance, that the 'halting slave' of Epaphroditus might have owned for his spiritual sister the English girl whose only prayer for herself, 'in life and death'—a self-sufficing prayer, self-answered, and fulfilled even in the utterance—was for 'a chainless soul, with courage to endure.' Not often probably has such a petition gone up from within the walls of a country parsonage as this :—

> And if I pray, the only prayer
> That moves my lips for me,
> Is—Leave the heart that now I bear,
> And give me liberty!

That word which is above every word might surely have been found written on that heart. Her love of earth for earth's sake, her tender loyalty and passionate reverence

for the All-mother, bring to mind the words of her sister's friend, and the first eloquent champion of her own genius :—

> I praise thee, mother earth! oh earth, my mother!
> Oh earth, sweet mother! gentle mother earth!
> Whence thou receivest what thou givest I
> Ask not as a child asketh not his mother,
> Oh earth, my mother!

No other poet's imagination could have conceived that agony of the girl who dreams she is in heaven, and weeps so bitterly for the loss of earth that the angels cast her out in anger, and she finds herself fallen on the moss and heather of the mid moor-head, and wakes herself with sobbing for joy. It is possible that to take full delight in Emily Brontë's book one must have something by natural inheritance of her instinct and something by earliest association of her

love for the same special points of earth—the same lights and sounds and colours and odours and sights and shapes of the same fierce free landscape of tenantless and fruitless and fenceless moor; but however that may be, it was assuredly with no less justice of insight and accuracy of judgment than humility of self-knowledge and fidelity of love that Charlotte in her day of solitary fame assigned to her dead sister the crown of poetic honour which she as rightfully disclaimed for herself. Full of poetic quality as her own work is throughout, that quality is never condensed or crystallised into the proper and final form of verse. But the pure note of absolutely right expression for things inexpressible in full by prose at its highest point of ade-

quacy—the formal inspiration of sound which at once reveals itself, and which can fully reveal itself by metrical embodiment alone, in the symphonies and antiphonies of regular word-music and definite instinctive modulation of corresponsive tones—this is what Emily had for her birthright as certainly as Charlotte had it not. Here are a few lines to give evidence for themselves on that score.

He comes with western winds, with evening's wandering airs,
With that clear dusk of heaven that brings the thickest stars.
Winds take a pensive tone, and stars a tender fire,
And visions rise, and change, that kill me with desire.

Desire for nothing known in my maturer years,
When Joy grew mad with awe, at counting future tears.

* * * * * *

Oh, dreadful is the check—intense the agony—
When the ear begins to hear, and the eye begins to see;
When the pulse begins to throb, the brain to think again,
The soul to feel the flesh, and the flesh to feel the chain.

If here is not the pure distinctive note of song as opposed to speech—the 'lyrical cry,' as Mr. Arnold calls it—I know not where to seek it in English verse since Shelley. Another such unmistakable note is struck in the verses headed 'Remembrance,' where the deep sense of division wellnigh melts and dies into a dream of reunion and revival by the might of memories 'that are most dearly sweet and bitter.' Here too is the same profound perception of an abiding power, but little less if surely less than omnipotence, in the old dumb divinities of Earth and Time—gods only not yet found strong enough to divide long love from death;

Severed at last by Time's all-severing wave.

All these samples are from the little

triune publication of 1846; which gave also some witness of the latent and labouring powers, as yet unsure of aim and outlet, but feeling their unquiet way to right and left in the deep underworld of Charlotte Brontë's growing genius. But the final expression in verse of Emily's passionate and inspired intelligence was to be uttered from lips already whitened though not yet chilled by the present shadow of unterrifying death. No last words of poet or hero or sage or saint were ever worthy of longer and more reverent remembrance than that appeal which is so far above and beyond a prayer to the indestructible God within herself; a psalm of trust so strangely (as it seems) compounded of personal and pantheistic faith, at once fiery and solemn, full alike of re-

signation and of rapture, far alike from the conventions of vulgar piety and the complacencies of scientific limitation; as utterly disdainful of doctrine as of doubt, as contemptuous of hearsay as reverent of itself, as wholly stripped and cleared and lightened from all burdens and all bandages and all incrustations of creed as it is utterly pervaded and possessed by the sublime and irrefutable passion of belief.

The praise of Emily Brontë can be no alien or discursive episode in the briefest and most cursory notice, the least adequate or exhaustive panegyric of her sister; and far less would it have seemed less than indispensable to that most faithful and devoted spirit of indomitable love which kept such constant

watch over her memory, and fought so good a fight for her fame. There is no more significant or memorable touch of nature in the records of her noble soul and unalterable heart than we find in her instant and her life-long thankfulness for the fervent tribute of Mr. Dobell to the profound and subtle genius, then already fallen still and silent, which had moved as a wind upon the tragic and perilous waters of passion overtopped by the shadow of 'Wuthering Heights.' Those who would understand Charlotte, even more than those who would understand Emily, should study the difference of tenderness between the touch that drew Shirley Keeldar and the touch that drew Lucy Snowe. This latter figure, as Mr. Wemyss Reid has observed with indisputable accuracy of insight, was

doubtless, if never meant to win liking or made to find favour in the general reader's eyes, yet none the less evidently on that account the faithful likeness of Charlotte Brontë, studied from the life, and painted by her own hand with the sharp austere precision of a photograph rather than a portrait. But it is herself with the consolation and support of her genius withdrawn, with the strength of her spiritual arm immeasurably shortened, the cunning of her right hand comparatively cancelled; and this it is that makes the main undertone and ultimate result of the book somewhat mournfuller even than the literal record of her mournful and glorious life. In the house where I now write this there is a picture which I have known through all the years I can remember—a landscape by Crome;

showing just a wild sad track of shoreward brushwood and chill fen, blasted and wasted by the bitter breath of the east wind blowing off the eastward sea, shrivelled and subdued and resigned as it were with a sort of grim submission to the dumb dark tyranny of a full-charged thunder-cloud which masks the mid heaven of midnoon with the heavy muffler of midnight, and leaves but here and there a dull fierce gleam of discomfortable and deadened sunlight along the haggard sky-line or below it. As with all this it is yet always a pleasure to look upon so beautiful and noble a study of so sad and harsh-featured an outlying byway through the weariest waste places of the world, so is it in its kind a perpetual pleasure to revisit the wellnigh sunless landscape of Lucy Snowe's sad, passionate,

and valiant life. But to us, knowing what we all now know of the designer, there seems a touch of pathos beyond all articulate expression in the contrast, when we turn from this to the ideal decoration of Shirley Keeldar's, and remember that here is the vision of the life she would fain have realized for her dead and best beloved and most dearly honoured sister; who had had in the days of her actual life as harsh and strange a time of it as her own. From the character of Shirley, as from the character of Lucy Snowe, the artist has naturally as of necessity withdrawn the component element that in its effect and result at least was or is for us now the dominant and distinctive quality of Emily Brontë as of Charlotte—the special gift and application of her creative genius; and on the

other hand we can barely imagine that austere and fiery poetess, a creature so admirably and terribly compounded of tragic genius and Stoic heroism, a jester of pleasantry so bitter and so grim in those brief bleak flashes of northern humour that lighten across the byways of her book from the rigid old lips of the Calvinist farm-servant —we can barely, I say, conceive of her as exchanging such rapid passes of light bright fence in a laughing war of words with the reverend and gallant old Cossack Helstone as sharpen and quicken the dialogue and action of the most gracious and joyous interlude in 'Shirley.' Yet surely Charlotte should have known as well as she loved her sister; and therefore we may more reasonably and more confidently infer that but for the

brilliant study of Shirley Keeldar we should never have seen with the eye of our imagination any other than a misconceived and mutilated portrait, a disfigured and discoloured likeness of Emily Brontë; one curtailed of the fair proportions, if not diminished from the natural stature of her spirit; discrowned and disinherited of its livelier and gentler charm of living feature, though not degraded or dethroned from the august succession to their strength for endurance or rebellion most beseeming a lineal daughter of the earth-born giants, more ancient in their godlike lineage than all modern reigning gods.

The habit of direct study from life which has given us, among its finest and most precious results, these two contrasted figures of

Shirley Keeldar and Lucy Snowe, affords yet another point of contrast or distinction between the manner and motive of work respectively perceptible in the design of either sister. Emily Brontë, like William Blake, would probably have said, or at least would presumably have felt, that such study after the model was to her impossible—an attempt but too certain to diminish her imaginative insight and disable her creative hand; while Charlotte evidently never worked so well as when painting more or less directly from nature. Almost the only apparent exception, as far as we—the run of her readers—know, is the wonderful and incomparable figure of Rochester. For M. Paul she must have had some kind of model, however transfigured and dilated by the

splendid influence of her own genius; for such studies as Madame Beck and Miss Fanshawe she doubtless had the sitters in her mind's eye as clearly and as close as under the lens of a photographic machine; but how she came first to conceive and finally to fashion that perfect study of noble and faultful and suffering manhood remains one of the most insoluble riddles ever set by genius as a snare or planned as a maze for the judgment of any lesser intelligence than its own. There in any case is the result—alive at all events, and deathless; defiant alike of explanation or reproduction by any critic or copyist. The incredible absurdity and the ineffable impertinence of one solution proposed at the time, which sought in the dedication of the book for a hint at the ori-

ginal of the hero, were worthy of the flat-headed and fork-tongued generation which could produce a notorious comment on 'Jane Eyre,' to the effect that its author must be a woman who long since had deservedly forfeited the society of her own sex. It is of infinitely small moment that we know only by its offence the obscene animal now nailed up for this offence by the ear, though not by name—its particular name being as undiscoverable as its generic designation is unmistakable—to the undecaying gibbet of immemorial contempt. When a farmer used to nail a dead polecat on the outside of his barndoor, it was surely less from any specific personal rancour of retaliatory animosity towards that particular creature than by way of judicial admonition to the tribe as yet

untrapped, the horde as yet unhanged, which might survive to lament, if not to succeed, the malodorous malefactor. No mortal can now be curious to verify the name as well as the nature of the typical specimen which then emitted in one spasm of sub-human spite at once the snarl and the stench proper to its place and kind. But we know that from the earlier days of Shelley onwards to these later days of Tennyson, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, become untrue, dishonest, unjust, impure, unlovely, and ill-famed, when passed through the critical crucible of the Quarterly Review.

For many among the minor types in

Charlotte Brontë's works it was seemingly somewhat easier than perhaps it should have been at the time of their appearance to detect the living and not always other than unoffending antitypes. If the immortal three curates of 'Shirley' did indeed admit their respective likenesses, and accept for each other and themselves the names by which they were rebaptized in such bitter waters of ridicule—a font filled rather from the springs of Marah than the stream of Jordan, which served Chateaubriand's purpose so much better than the upshot of the ceremony would seem to have served his prince—it must in common justice be owned that the admirable candour and good humour of her models should have touched their satirist with a sense of something keener than compunction; for

such simple honesty and hearty courtesy as must have been more than needed to make the very dullest and most impervious of reverend or irreverend gentlemen continue to bear themselves with the frank civility of kindly custom towards the solitary and sorrowful woman whose scornful genius had done its worst on them—and that worst, even to a thick-headed and thick-skinned victim, how terrible!—must surely also have been more than sufficient to disprove the full justice of the caricature, and impeach the accuracy of whatever was most offensive in her design or injurious in her imputations. To the vivid yet temperate fidelity of the Yorke family group we have the witness of a member offered to the photographer of that singular and sharply outlined circle. In most

cases probably the design begun by means of the camera was transferred for completion to the canvass. The likeness of Mr. Helstone to Mr. Brontë, for example, was thus at once enlarged and subdued, heightened and modified, by the skilful and noble instinct which kept it always within the gracious and natural bounds prescribed and maintained by the fine tact of filial respect. No more lifelike or memorable portrait was ever wrought into the composition of an ideal or historic picture by the loftiest art of any Venetian painter. The man's hard, rigid, contemptuous, yet never quite unkindly or unrighteous force of character—his keen enjoyment of action and struggle, his fierce imperious relish of resistance—the fine soldierly quality of spirit,

somewhat too generally mistimed or misplaced, for lack of fit or full occasion to call it forth, which makes him always less ready to 'go with sir priest than sir knight'—all these points are relieved and combined with a skill and strength of touch, perhaps incomparable in the work of any other woman.

But time and cunning would fail us to discover, as art and eloquence would fail us to commend, a tithe of the examples that might and should be cited in evidence of that noble and fruitful genius which found in the frail temple of her mortal life a minister so high and pure of spirit, so faithful and heroic of heart. Nowhere is its peculiar gift of subtle and pathetic veracity more notable than in the brief last pages written between the too closely neighbouring dates of her

marriage and her death ; a precious fragment to which the few and fine words of introduction prefixed by the illustrious writer who had been the peculiar god of her inmost idolatry have always seemed to me worthy of special remembrance among the truest and the noblest, the manliest and the kindliest lines that ever came from the pen of Mr. Thackeray. It is a coincidence as memorable as it is deplorable that so many of the best and greatest who have died within the reach of our recollection should have left, like these, some splendid and broken sample of their highest workmanship unfinished for the admiration and the craving and the fruitless passionate regret of aftertime ; even as Shakespeare himself left behind him the two colossal fragments that a hand in the one

case only lesser than his own, in the other case as impotent and impertinent as the hand of his very worst and latest commentator, ventured to rehandle and recast into the shapes under which we know them as 'Timon of Athens' and 'The Two Noble Kinsmen.' Too soon after he had 'taken to foster' Charlotte Brontë's little orphan tale of 'Emma,' Mr. Thackeray had in turn to leave half unshapen, and recognisable only by grand rough indications of its giant parentage, what should have been the stateliest and most stalwart offspring of his latter years—born to disprove the premature charge of comparative décadence and debility not unjustly incurred by its more immediate predecessors; then the great man so improperly rated as his rival passed also away in the mid heat of

work, leaving again but a bright fragment of perplexing shape and splendour; and now but lately the biographer of Dickens likewise has left us cheated of the ardent and grateful hopes that were fixed on the completion of the first adequate or trustworthy Life of Swift. Not one of these nor of all their generation has left or yet will leave a nobler memory, and it may well be that in the eyes of Englishmen yet unborn not one will be found to have left a nobler memorial, than the unforgotten life and the imperishable works of Charlotte Brontë.

THE END.

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